

NEWS' COMPARTMENTALIZATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR FOOD BIOTECHNOLOGY COVERAGE

Robert A. Logan¹

This essay explains that some of the news media's challenges and problems in covering agrobiotechnology might be linked to structural organization and traditions within the nation's newsrooms. Within serious news organizations, food biotechnology news often has been perceived as an agriculture food or business story, instead of a science, environment, or investigative story. All these news emphases, or beats, have different traditions and inclinations in news reporting, which may explain how food biotechnology news has been covered by American journalists. This essay notes the importance to increase interest in food biotechnology coverage—especially among science writers within serious news organizations.

Key words: journalism; food biotechnology news coverage; public communication of food biotechnology; science journalism; agricultural journalism.

Readers of AgBioForum are accustomed to criticisms about the news media's coverage of agrotechnology. This essay does not defend when news reports about food biotechnology are inaccurate or lack context. However, it is possible that some of the press' shortcomings in agrotechnology coverage may be an accidental result of how food biotechnology stories have been assigned within the nation's newsrooms.

Some of the press' problems in covering food biotechnology may be linked to “newsroom beat” structures. A “beat” represents an area that reporters and editors are routinely asked to cover. Instead of moving to the science, environment, or investigative areas within serious news organizations, food biotechnology often is covered by food, agricultural and business writers.

This essay introduces some of the intricacies of how “news beats” are compartmentalized within large news organizations and notes how a beat often determines how reporters do or do not approach complex news topics. The rhetorical approaches used within news stories often are called “framing.” Framing includes common journalistic devices such as pitting experts against each other as the focus of a news story, or having prominent corporate executives or governmental officials as primary sources in news reporting. The essay concludes that some of the improvements in food biotechnology coverage may occur by multidimensional approaches and especially by more involvement by science writers.

¹Robert A. Logan is a Professor, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, and Director of the Science Journalism Center at the School of Journalism, University of Missouri-Columbia. ©2001 AgBioForum.

It frequently surprises persons outside journalism that some news beats are reasonably well organized and reporters frequently participate in self-developed professional training (Hartz & Chappell, 1997; Blum & Knudson, 1997). Therein lies some hope in encouraging the press to improve its food biotechnology coverage.

The Press’ Compartmentalization: Science, Environmental And Investigative Beats

In order to cover news quickly, most large print news organizations have organized themselves into beats, or smaller areas of expertise, for more than a century (Missouri Group, 1999; Moen, 2000). The larger the news organization (regardless if print or broadcast), the more news tends to be produced within small teams of persons.

At the largest newspapers and news organizations in the United States (e.g. The New York Times, Washington Post, and the Associated Press), these teams often have some expertise within the areas they cover. This expertise does not extend to smaller newspapers, magazines or most non-network radio and television stations, nor does it extend to larger newsrooms when a major unexpected news story unfolds and when most of the staff is on vacation, on assignment, and so on. In the latter cases, reporters on general assignment without considerable background sometimes are pressed into service (Missouri Group, 1999). Most journalists understand that this is how mistakes occur, and most United States journalists agree that reporters and editors should be reasonably well prepared to cover highly complex, multidimensional news stories, such as food biotechnology (Hartz & Chappell, 1998). However, some peculiar problems stem from the traditional organization of news beats (within sophisticated news organizations) and how journalists converge on agricultural and food biotechnology as a field.

The Fieldguide for Science Writers (produced and edited by the National Association of Science Writers) explains how science journalism evolved as a stand-alone beat (Blum & Knudson, 1997). The Fieldguide provides science writers with tips covering the most common areas of the beat’s responsibilities. These are listed and include psychology, infectious diseases, public health, neuroscience, toxics and risk reporting, earth sciences, physics, and astronomy—all within a variety of news mediums (television, newspapers, magazines, opinion, trade journals, and books) (Blum & Knudson, 1997). The complete list includes neither agriculture nor food.

The Fieldguide also emphasizes that science news is grounded in research findings published in refereed medical and science journals, such as Science, Nature, The Lancet, The Journal of the American Medical Association, and The New England Journal of Medicine. Readers and viewers get a steady diet of what is new to physicians and scientists (Blum & Knudson, 1997). The agenda is set by the persons who are most knowledgeable about their current discipline. But as Logan (2001, p. 24) has argued, since even refereed results are sometimes preliminary and reflect frontier and challengeable evidence, science and medical writers often have to place them with a narrative context. Albeit buried in a story, readers and viewers sometimes are informed when, if ever, a new pill will be available and if a newly identified gene will result in actual medical therapy. The emphasis is to help readers to understand the difference between a finding’s often-delayed diffusion, or migration to a textbook science status, and the more immediate assertion within a story’s headline or lead. The context helps citizens understand the veracity, authenticity, and status of the initial claim.

The environmental beat is conceived a little differently. The key social actors in environmental news stories tend to be governmental agencies, attorneys, politicians, accountants, public interest advocates, and corporate executives, instead of the persons who study the impact of clear cutting

a forest or whether agricultural run off affects groundwater and rural streams (Logan, 2001, p. 25).

While the actual research and the work of natural resources experts is not overlooked, it is sometimes de-emphasized especially when compared to other areas within science and medical journalism (Logan, 2001, p. 25). In comparison to science and medical reporters (who pore through and report the results of major journals), the emphasis to inform citizens about environmental research is less omnipresent. However, there is a significant emphasis on criticisms of existing environment policies, especially when independent researchers and public interest organizations challenge corporate environmental stewardship and governmental oversight of the nation’s ecological welfare. In short, journalists who wish to cover research gravitate toward science beats. Journalists who wish to cover broader public policy dimensions gravitate toward environment beats.

Both science and environmental reporting contrast with investigative journalism, where the emphasis is to probe independently and originate evidence (Weinberg, 1995; King, 1998). Unlike science or environmental reporting, state-of-the-art investigative journalism focuses on computer assisted reporting, or obtaining public data bases from governmental agencies to ascertain evidence regarding conduct, stewardship, or any gaps between publicly stated goals and actions (Weinberg, 1995; King, 1998). More importantly, investigative reporters conceive themselves differently than do science and environmental journalists. Similar to science and environmental journalism, investigative reporting reflects its own ethos, internal goals, and norms, which represent a subtle, but differentiated, set of professional skills (Weinberg, 1995; King, 1998; Glasser & Ettma, 1998).

Agriculture And Food Beats

Although there are important individual exceptions, it is not a stretch to suggest that journalists who are inclined to cover science or environment and are also investigative-oriented are not necessarily drawn to routine food and agriculture beats, or vice versa. Essentially, agricultural and food beats reflect different traditions and legacies than science, environmental, or investigative journalism. Until very recently, neither the agricultural nor food beat radiated the traditions to cover science, the public policy undertones of environmental journalism, or the zeal to investigate public documents and data bases that infuses investigative journalism (Pawlick, 1998; Boone, Meisenbach & Tucker, 2000).

The latter sentence is not intended to criticize or denigrate the efforts by journalists in agricultural or food areas. Rather, food and agricultural beats evolved differently and were never primarily focused on nutrition research, the details of public policy, or investigating the stewardship of federal agencies in promoting food safety. In fact, the norms in food and agricultural beats are similar to business reporting. Traditionally, food, agricultural, and business reporters covered topics including: economic prospects, forecasts, current prices, weather, United States Department of Agriculture crop and related financial support or incentives, farm policy, quarterly corporate financial reports, shareholder information, market sector information, entrepreneurs, borrowing and lending costs, product and service incubators, new products and innovations, new employees, user impact, consumer information, and product reviews (Pawlick, 1998; Boone, Meisenbach & Tucker, 2000).

Martineau (2001) explains that food biotechnology exploration primarily began within major agricultural-based, publicly traded companies that sought to introduce a series of innovations. These innovations required substantial corporate investment and had an array of initial economic

implications across most areas within agricultural economics. Food biotechnology innovations also affected the perception of some large agricultural companies, especially among investors, consumers, and farmers.

Not surprisingly, in many newsrooms across the US, food biotechnology started as a business story. The focus of coverage in many American news organizations has been on the growth, investments of food biotechnology firms, their economic and social challenges, and the reaction by product users and fiscal prospects for the future.

A notable exception has been some reporting on the environmental impacts of agricultural biotechnological products, such as *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) corn. The debate frequently has been framed as critical assertions (or research) by sources primarily within university and public interest organizations that conflict with evidence and decisions made by governmental agencies and corporations. This story followed a rare rhetorical framework for business and food writers (and stood out as a result). However, the story followed normal rhetorical or framing patterns within the environmental beat where it migrated (at times) in the 1990s.

Current Challenges And Moving Ahead

The current irony is that food biotechnology has been perceived as an environmental, business, food, and agriculture story, while at the same time a discernment of events requires significant science-based dimensions, including an understanding of genetics, biochemistry, basic science, and science's self-righting processes. The current challenge is to move more food biotechnology coverage to the science beat. Some of the nation's leading science writers, as explained above, routinely frame news as covering refereed research, evaluating evidence, and providing some context about evidence. While the topic of risk assessment is a relatively recent addition in the science beat, experts in risk assessment occasionally help reporters provide perspective about science issues (Blum & Knudson, 1997). So, part of the task ahead is to persuade more senior news editors that food biotechnology contains as much science as agricultural economics, investor news, and environmental stewardship.

A second task is to encourage senior news editors to permit talented business reporters to cover science aspects within food biotechnology stories—or to foster more comprehensive approaches within other news beats. As an example, a science context is routinely integrated within business reports within some of the San Francisco Chronicle's biotechnology coverage. A January 2001 workshop sponsored by the National Association of Science Writers discussed the need for more cooperation and multiple framing approaches in biotechnology plus pharmaceutical industry coverage (where reporting legacies within beats and current challenges are similar) (National Association of Science Writers, January 2001). As a constructive suggestion, the leadership within the food biotechnology community might encourage this trend by helping journalism schools, journalism training organizations (such as the Poynter Institute), and reporter organizations (such as the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing) create special workshops where business, science, food, agriculture, and environmental reporters discuss food biotechnology coverage and learn new skills.

Because it is widely asserted that the news media has not helped the public understand food biotechnology research and related risk assessment issues (Logan, Fears & Wilson, 1998), some investment in helping reporters and editors receive the skills to cover comprehensively food biotechnology seems like a prudent remedy. The improvements in food biotechnology's beat compartmentalization will take cooperation and impartial, educationally based approaches.

However, there are precedents for progress that all sides involved in food biotechnology issues, including journalists, might better address.

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